

Lawrence University Lux

Lawrence University Honors Projects

5-31-2017

Looking Through the Glass: An Album of Original Music and Accompanying Artist Book

Sam Genualdi
sam.genualdi@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://lux.lawrence.edu/luhp>

 Part of the [Audio Arts and Acoustics Commons](#), [Book and Paper Commons](#), [Composition Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons](#), [Music Performance Commons](#), [Other Music Commons](#), [Poetry Commons](#), and the [Printmaking Commons](#)

© Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Recommended Citation

Genualdi, Sam, "Looking Through the Glass: An Album of Original Music and Accompanying Artist Book" (2017). *Lawrence University Honors Projects*. 110.
<https://lux.lawrence.edu/luhp/110>

This Honors Project is brought to you for free and open access by Lux. It has been accepted for inclusion in Lawrence University Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of Lux. For more information, please contact colette.brautigam@lawrence.edu.

Lawrence University

Looking Through the Glass:

An Album of Original Music and Accompanying Artist Book

Sam Genualdi

Honors Project

Faculty Advisor – Professor Ben Rinehart

Faculty Advisor – Professor Matt Turner

May 1st, 2017

Introduction and Background

Looking Through the Glass is a project that is both the culmination of my work as an artist and a musician as well as the mark of a new beginning in my journey. With my Lawrence career drawing to a close, I am glad to say that I found a project that built on all of the skills I have gained and simultaneously helped me to discover new passions and develop new skills. Through the past year, I have created my first full length album of original music and an accompanying artist book of handmade prints. The music and the art work together to create an exploration of themes such as memory, transition, love, loss and faith. While the work as a whole could be viewed as an elaborate diary entry for this moment in my life, it is my hope that the audience might be able to relate to the work on a personal level. The album is roughly forty minutes long over twelve tracks that span a variety of styles and textures unified through concept and tone of voice. The book is hand-bound and hand-printed in all aspects (except for the credits insert which was a digital print), and contains abstract imagery that reinforces the themes presented in the music. Through this project, I have deepened a relationship between music and art, created positive career-advancing opportunities, and found a strong sense of self-direction.

I'd like to give some insight as to where I come from and what brought me to this point... In the spring of 2011, with graduation from high school approaching, I had dabbled in a number of interests but had been unable to settle on a focus. With the encouragement of my parents, some teachers, and a 13-year-developed disenfranchisement with school, I elected to take a gap year before pursuing higher education. Hoping that I could use that year to gain some sense of direction, I worked full time at the bakery around the corner from my house. I spent time playing music casually, but thought of it as a hobby more than anything else. The cornerstone of my gap year was a 30-day mountaineering course in the Cascade mountains of Washington State. A transformative experience to be sure, when my gap year came to a close I knew two things: Firstly, I had no interest in working in the service industry full-time ever again, and secondly, I missed learning and wanted to go to go back to school. Having already deferred my acceptance to Allegheny College, I opted to attend in the fall of 2012.

Within weeks after beginning at Allegheny College it became abundantly clear to me that I had taken music for granted my entire life. Having parents as musicians, growing up so close to Chicago, and attending schools with strong music programs, I was put in a position where it was easy to assume that music would always be there for me. I was wrong. Allegheny College, while a great school, has no conservatory and a student population relatively uninterested in music. Over the course of my freshman year there, I found the few students who played music, and also ventured into the surrounding Pennsylvania community. By the time I finished I was performing on stage with musicians over twice my age, but I knew this said more about the quality of the music scene than my own skills. During this time, I laid a foundation to transfer, and while I had never visited the Lawrence University campus it became the obvious choice. The stars aligned in regard to finance, faculty, and proximity to home. I began my career at Lawrence the following fall.

Upon my arrival, I was thrown into the Lawrence University Jazz Ensemble, Lawrence's flagship of the Jazz Department then led by Fred Sturm, the man responsible for building jazz at Lawrence. As a transfer student, I was older but still had to go through all of the freshman courses in music theory. In retrospect, those two extra years are certainly what gave me the maturity and intense drive necessary to take the fullest advantage of my undergraduate career, culminating with this project, in receiving a Downbeat Award for Outstanding Original Composition for Large Ensemble, and in receiving the 2017 Watson Fellowship. I have to say, that it is in thanks to Fred Sturm for seeing potential in my audition videos that any of this became possible. I would like to think that if he were here now to see what I have done with my education at Lawrence University that he would be proud.

If you were to ask me in my first year at Lawrence University what my senior year might look like, I would probably have said that I would still be performing in Jazz Ensemble, hope to be playing in Combo 1 (the top small jazz group), and pursuing a jazz guitar album. Things rapidly shifted after that first year, beginning with the opportunity to play in Combo 1 as a sophomore under the direction of Bill Carrothers. Bill asked that each of us bring in original music for the group to perform. I rediscovered great satisfaction in the creation of my original music, something I hadn't experienced since high school playing in bands and making 'beats' on

music production software. I don't put the word 'beats' in quotes to minimize it as an art-form, just the opposite: I wish to draw attention to the fact that I, and my peers, were in fact composing legitimate music as opposed to the frequently held misconception that we were 'messing around'. In fact, at this point I would consider my friends who are beatsmiths to be some of the most talented and dedicated musicians I know, whom I hold in the highest esteem. I mention this because I ultimately returned to this process for *Looking Through the Glass*, as I will describe later on.

As my interest in composition and improvisation outside the confines of classical and jazz music grew, I began studying with Professor Matt Turner which led to the development of a self-designed major in Contemporary Improvisation. This was a turning point in my Lawrence career. The self-designed major allowed me to apply the liberal arts model to my conservatory education. Since then I have had the opportunity to focus my efforts on studying composition and improvisation more seriously, to perform in Viking Chorale, Gamelan Cahaya Asri, Sambistas, Improvisation Group of Lawrence University, a contemporary classical chamber group called Levels, to be Co-Founder of the Deep Listeners of Lawrence University and many more than it would really make sense to mention here. I feel so fortunate to have been given a strong foundation on which to build my skills by the rigor of the conservatory, but to then shift my focus toward a more globally-minded and holistic view of music.

In November of my junior year, Dean Pertl recommended that I consider applying to the Silk Road Project's Global Musician Workshop, suggesting that it would be a great fit for me. My experience at the Global Musician Workshop (GMW) was transformative in a number of ways. The opportunity to be surrounded by musicians from over 30 different countries was eye-opening to say the least. I was astounded by the power of music as a way to embrace and transcend cultural difference, and found the collaborative aspect of the workshop inspiring. GMW would become the impetus for my Watson application, but also for my honors project. While at GMW, one of the ensembles I performed in was led by Abigail Washburn, a great banjo player and one of my favorite songwriters. On the Sunday before we all left, I had the amazing opportunity to interview her and her husband, Bela Fleck (Washburn and Fleck). Here

is an excerpt of that interview in which we are speaking on the topic of ‘musical health’, that had a profound impact on me, though I wouldn’t know it until later.

Sam Genualdi: Another thing that just popped into my head as we were talking about this and coming back to mental musical health – have either of you found that music has been a catharsis for you, and if so, in what way has it been helpful? Because I think music can be a really powerful tool for actual mental health for a lot of people, myself included.

Bela Fleck: Definitely. (To Abigail) You want to go first?

Abigail Washburn: That’s making me think about what I was talking about at a community meeting the other day. I actually got this word from Krista Tippett, “On Being” – do you guys know that show?

BF: It’s an NPR show where they interview people about deep stuff.

AW: A really good show. A great show. They interview, like, one of the best-known rabbis in the world and then the Dalai Lama and then someone high up in the Catholic church, so it can be religious, but also it does—

BF: Bobby McFerrin, Yo-Yo Ma ... and us—

AW: Us. (Laughs.)

BF: She interviews a lot of people. She does a lot of different things.

AW: But she said it because I was talking about singing that coal mining song that I did the other night, by Sarah Ogan Gunning and I was just in tears, I had just watched a

documentary about Sarah Ogan Gunning. There's this great documentary group in Kentucky called Appalshop, like "Appalachia." They make films, and have since the 60's, and they have all these amazing elders that play music in the mountains there. So they made a documentary about her (Sarah Ogan Gunning), and they found older footage. They didn't do the footage, but they found footage and put it all together. And it was the story of her family living in this – they showed her in her actual hut she lived in with her family, and holes in the roof, and talked about how her mother and her baby starved to death.

BF: And her husband died.

AW: Of black lung. And I just, for a few days, every time I'd think about her, I would weep, you know? It was just so sad, and it really just connected into whatever suffering I needed to feel, too. And then I started singing the song, and I started being able to get through it without being sad – too sad – and then I started to feel strength in it, like, "Wow. This woman went through all this, and she still lived to tell these stories through songs, and she went on to be a big part of what we would probably today call a civil rights movement." In the 1940's, she was trying to get all the African-Americans in the area together with her – with Native Americans – to rise up against the people that were keeping them down. I mean, she wrote songs about that. They aren't my favorite songs – that's why I don't sing them, but this is one of my favorites, "Come All Ye Coal Miners" because she's singing from a wife's perspective. She was just a phenomenal woman that rose above all of this loss and suffering to share with people.

Anyway, I sang it for Krista Tippett on the show, and then she said, "Song is such a wonderful thing, isn't it? Because it's like a container where you can put all these feelings." And I was like, "Yes! A song *is* like a container – you can put the feelings in there. You have to process it before you can put it in, you gotta process it, but then you turn it into whatever soup you want, you put it in there, and you get to put it away

when you're done singing. You, know? It's not like I have to keep suffering for Sarah Ogan Gunning because I sang that song. I get to put it back on the shelf, and then pull out the next one. I just think it's a really great way to think about it.

That summer, a few weeks after GMW, I would write my first song. It seems silly to say it now, because I have been listening to, playing, and performing song-form music most of my life, but I never possessed the confidence to write a song. I think it was hearing Abby talk about it, somehow that triggered something deep inside me that said, "I need to do this".

I continued to write songs through that summer, and as I approached my senior year I knew that I needed to shift my focus. I realized that my senior experience would be foolishly spent pursuing something that I already could feel completely secure doing. The jazz guitar project I originally planned on felt like something I could do any time, but I had this chance to redefine myself as a musician and do something new with the safety net and resources that I have here at Lawrence. I showed the songs I had been working on to Professor Matt Turner and he encouraged me to continue my songwriting. The foundations for this project were secured. Having the support of my studio professor and a newfound drive to pursue songwriting I found the confidence to push into this project despite the many unknowns. I have to give credit to Professor Turner here, because I believe most teachers (and most students) generally want their senior project or recital to be at the highest possible level. Naturally this would mean building directly on skills from the previous 3 years of study and choosing impressive repertoire that the student is able to play well. Instead, and perhaps a better way of viewing the Senior Experience, is that it is an opportunity to grow and try new things, which Professor Turner completely supported. Despite the fact that it would require a momentous amount of effort and more than a little luck for *Looking Through the Glass* to come into fruition, having Professor Turner's encouragement helped to give me the confidence to do it.

Had I remained at Allegheny College, I can say with certainty that I would have ended up majoring in Art with an emphasis in printmaking. At Allegheny I studied relief, intaglio and monotype printmaking processes with Professor Sue Buck. That interest continued through my experience at Lawrence University. Upon my arrival at Lawrence I reached out to Professor Ben

Rinehart expressing my interest in continuing my education in Printmaking. Professor Rinehart waved the requirement that I take the Intro course on the basis of my background in this graphic medium. I have taken Intermediate Printmaking, Advanced Printmaking, a Topics Course in Artist Books and an independent study for this project with Professor Rinehart. In these courses I was able to continue my education in relief and intaglio processes, gain an introduction to lithography and cultivate a new interest in the Artist Book as an art-form, which is one of Professor Rinehart's primary foci. My final projects in both Intermediate and Advanced printmaking were book-based projects and the topics course provided me with the opportunity to learn a variety of new structures and techniques.

I have found that my work in printmaking and bookmaking parallel and inform my music in unexpected ways. For instance, I have turned my inspiration into something akin to a swinging pendulum. By working in multiple disciplines at the same time I can maintain energy and momentum. When I feel as though I am hitting a wall with my music, I make art and vice versa. Additionally, my interest in improvisational music has transferred over to my art. I enjoy projects that allow me to follow my intuition and react to process. Similar to the way that I feel when I am improvising in a musical setting, I am able to interact with structure and image physically, which is engaging and exciting.

During fall term of my senior year I had the idea to self-produce and release an album of original songs that would be housed in a hand-bound artist book containing original artwork. From this conception of the idea I moved forward without hesitation pursuing faculty advisement from Professors Turner and Rinehart on each respective portion of the project. I received a Senior Experience Grant to fund the project. This funding was to support the purchase of art supplies, compensate studio musicians, get the music professionally mastered, and have the CD's printed.

Compositional Process and Meaning in the Music

As long as I have been composing, my process has been quite fluid. No two pieces are composed in exactly the same way, making each song a unique experience. I find that I can

keep myself interested, engaged and working by maintaining a variety of processes at the same time. Especially in the context of songwriting – the primary basis for the musical portion of this project – I am learning quickly. While built with a similar foundation, each song has been created in a different way. I appreciate this aspect of the work as a metaphor for my approach to life. I enjoy living each day differently, and engaging in a variety of experiences. Additionally, I found myself returning to a process that I had not explored since high school when I made ‘beats’. This process involved setting up an engaging space in which I could instantaneously gratify my creative musical impulses, much like the printmaking studio for my visual art. As opposed to composing directly onto a page, often at a piano or some other instrument, in which largely the work is in the abstract until the point at which it is performed, I chose to utilize portable recording technology to take a ‘recording studio’ with me to many locations. I utilized my bedroom, various rooms in the conservatory, the extraordinarily reverberant space of the Wellness Center racquetball courts, The 602 Club in Appleton, and the ‘A’ studio at WFMT in Chicago for example. In each case, with associative sounds available, I became inspired to create something new – largely using improvisation as my main compositional tool. In fact, every part of the record is rooted in improvisation at some point, but by using various recording software programs as my ‘score paper’ I was able to organize and edit my thoughts quite easily. It was enjoyable to return to this form of creation with a great deal more musical skill under my belt. Similarly, I feel that my abilities as a songwriter were greatly informed by all that I have gained in my conservatory education. The music theory, exposure to different styles, strength in improvisation and compositional skills that I gained in the Conservatory all served me well in the pursuit of this project.

Most challenging was the actual singing. I never performed as a singer before this year, but wanted to be able to sing lead on all my own songs. I sought all available opportunities to improve my vocal skills by joining Viking Chorale (my first time singing in a choir), and by learning some of my favorite songs. Practice included singing along to albums in the car, singing to myself as I walked to class, and any other opportunity to use my voice. While I am a long way from the skill and control I would ultimately like to have, knowing that it takes years to develop the vocal muscles and memory, I am quite pleased with the results on *Looking Through the*

Glass. I am now able to successfully tune and manipulate the timbre of my voice at will. I have developed the skills to hear and sing harmony with other voices in improvised settings and even expanded my range slightly.

After all of the time that I have spent and the skills that I have gained through the project, including songwriting, singing, clawhammer banjo, lap steel guitar, recording engineering, audio editing and mixing, conducting recording sessions... Finding a smooth way to share my thoughts on the project has been a challenge. The rest of this paper is structured on a piece by piece basis in the order of the record. I hope that in the context of each song I am able to offer details on different aspects of the work and process that provide valuable insight into *Looking Through the Glass*. The full lyrics to each song can be found in the appendix, starting at page 26.

Summer's Warm Embrace

This track was originally composed over the summer 2016. All that I had recorded at that time was the vocal figure and the guitar part that occurs in the first few seconds. I recall coming up with the guitar part and the title of the piece in the same instance. The lilt of the harmony seemed to perfectly emote the gentle strolling pace of summer. Evenings spent sitting on the porch listening to the cicadas sing their songs were the inspiration for this piece.

In some instances, I treat the Digital Audio Workstation as a sketchbook of sorts, and as anyone who keeps a sketchbook or a journal can imagine, sometimes ideas don't resurface until much later. Such was the case with this piece. I rediscovered the project file with the essential inspiration for the piece much later, in fact this was the last piece to end up on my list of 'contenders' for the album. At the time I was searching for a Prelude idea and stumbled upon the file entitled 'Summer's Warm Embrace' in my computer. Once I listened to the song the feeling when I wrote it rushed back, like a smell that reminds you of another time and place. It was interesting to work on the piece after so much time had passed and I had composed nearly the entire album. I had the opportunity to nestle ideas from other tracks, as is common in a prelude, and make it feel more connected to the rest of the project through similar instrumentation, sonic space and density. I added lap steel (a type of electric guitar played with

a slide, which I learned specifically for this project), violin, and other sounds found elsewhere on the album. I also utilized the same types of reverb, frequency equalization and compression across the album to give the sense of the music existing in the same 'space' despite a distinctly 'non-live' sound.

One hears jittery electronics and frantic out-of-time drumming (courtesy of fellow Lawrentian, Spencer Tweedy) juxtaposed against spacious violin and lap steel guitar. This contrast hopefully holds onto the listener's attention. While I do not intend to tell the listener exactly what to think and feel in regards to my work – I believe that it is important to ask more questions than give answers – I do think that this piece, as is thematic of the work as a whole, is meant to represent the dissonance between old and new memories. This is evident in both the process and product of the piece. The warm contemplative beginning of the piece, composed in the summer, against the flailing feeling one often has in the midst of a busy day. Along those same lines, but with a different metaphor, I am interested in the idea of differing internal and external tempi. I seek to create a feeling of rapid external motion with an internal sense of calm, or vice versa, for the listener.

Looking Through the Glass

Primarily composed over the course of a couple of days in the winter, this piece sets the thematic tone for the record. The lyrics are a meditation on memory as a general concept. Memory is the inevitably warping lens that we all must look through as we relate to ourselves, others and the world around us. While that might sound as though it is a critique of the human experience, I take it at face value. There is both beauty and hardship to be found in memory. "The Glass" could be seen as the lens itself in the context of this greater theme throughout the entire album, but also symbolizes fragility, clarity, and separation.

In continuing with the theme of memory and looking at that from different angles, I also sought to invoke the feeling of a 'train of thought' in this piece. The lyrics sometimes take odd turns and don't particularly make traditional sense. I frequently find myself wondering how it is that I find myself arriving at a particular thought compared to the initial conception, when writing these lyrics I wanted to reach for that sensation.

The cornerstone of the lyrics of this particular song is the refrain 'I pose'. I recall when I was writing the lyrics for this song this particular line came out with no resistance. Sometimes I find that composing lyrics especially is a battle, and I need to employ various writing techniques – blackout poems, free writing, poetic devices etc. – but with this piece the ideas coalesced all at once. Often I write a piece and realize the meaning later, so the line "I pose" holds several meanings to me. This could pertain to one's relationship to their own self-worth and self-understanding as well as the way one wishes to present oneself to the world. I also have memories of instances in which I chose to be or act a particular way in a given situation to illicit a particular result – often failing in that pursuit. This line serves as a personal reminder for me to shine through any façade or 'pose' that I may take.

Despite the lack of a traditional chorus, the repetition of particular lines throughout the song as a refrain further serves the metaphor of memory in this piece. I find that in my experience, memory often takes a non-linear path. Specific images and thoughts lead in unexpected directions, and things seem to come up and relate to each other in ways that appear illogical at first but make more sense in time. The third stanza of the song says:

Paint dripping from the walls
We can't understand
Glyphs and clementines
So far to space
Bent and not said
And I pose, I pose

These lines attempt to speak to these indescribable aspects of the human experience without claiming to shed any direct light. As an admission of our inability to truly know what it is to be in another's mind, the best we can do is assume that everyone we encounter experiences the world in an equally complex way. In terms of what these words mean specifically to me, I find that they connect the dots between specific aspects of my childhood, attempting to invent written languages and contemplating my existence in the context of a the

world/universe as I look up into the night sky. I recall as a child imagining that this reality is actually just a snapshot in someone else's dream, and coming to the conclusion that we have to go on. Obviously, this is a simplification of concepts that are covered in courses on existentialism and philosophy, but relevant here none-the-less as a connection between the current work and childhood memories. There is a small degree of parallel between this and Lewis Carol's 'Through the Looking Glass' the sequel to 'Alice in Wonderland' (Carol). Comparisons can be drawn between the absurd and abstract nature of those stories and what I have done with the lyrics and the dreamy nature of the music, but the similarities end there. While I do not specifically intend to draw the connection between my work and 'Alice in Wonderland', I don't mind and acknowledge what parallels there are to be found.

A Leafless Dawn

The first purely instrumental piece on the record, *A Leafless Dawn* was composed at a time when I was listening to the work of percussionist, Jon Mueller, particularly his project called *Death Blues* and the release *Ensemble* (Mueller). His work draws on elements of minimalism and ritual while maintaining a depth of emotion to the music. Beginning with a simple figure in the key of F# Minor and 6/4 meter, I play on the minimalist themes found in Mueller's work while focusing heavily on texture and instrumentation. The piece builds steadily over the course of two minutes before breaking to leave a synthesized vocal sample layer to end the piece, which one might not have realized had already become a part of the texture some time before.

Through fate, I had the opportunity to work with Jon Mueller on this project. All of the percussion tracks heard on the piece are in fact his masterful work. It was truly remarkable to have the experience of working with an artist that I admire on my album and especially on a piece that was directly inspired by his work. Over the course of a single day at The Refuge in Appleton, with the recording expertise of Spencer Tweedy, we were able to record Jon's parts on four of the tracks.

The title of the piece is drawn from the distinct way that a sunrise looks as it passes through the canopy of a forest in winter – "A Leafless Dawn". I find this to be one of the most

beautiful sights, the endless ways that the branches intersect with each other to create deep fractal patterns that change as one walks and shifts the weight on their feet fascinate me. Much of the imagery I evoke asks the listener to give more attention to a sight or sound that one experiences often. There is beauty to be found in the mundane, requiring patience and reflection. The listener is rewarded for steady attention to the piece because of the additive structure, similarly to the way that the longer one is willing to stare at a pattern the more intricacies they notice.

Deep Breath

Deep Breath is about transition. The song is about the liminal space between events and things that we *know*. To me, these hazy uncertainties are some of the most profound and intriguing. Like the moment between waking and sleeping, these moments of ‘in-between’ are compelling because they are difficult to identify and describe. Sometimes, when we are twixt the familiar and the uncomfortable, those are the moments when we learn the most about ourselves. The compositional technique that I used to create this piece (as well as *Dark and Stormy* and *Almost Half-Way There*) was to re-tune my guitar in a semi-haphazard way, following my ear until the strings struck together created a pleasing and unfamiliar sound. In this way I found that I was able to force myself into the liminal, a space of discovery. All of the notes on my guitar were shifted around, and nothing was where it was supposed to be. This was effective for two reasons. Firstly, it threw all of the idioms I knew away, forcing me to commit to using my ears to find something that I liked. Secondly, I was forced to let go of my ego. Any thoughts about my ‘abilities’ on my primary instrument had to be set aside in order to allow myself to make mistakes and stumble until I found something. This proved to be an excellent exercise on a personal level and yielded exciting results. The sensation of being a beginner again is a powerful creative tool. I placed a finger on a string and built a chord that I liked and then through trial and error constructed a harmonic scheme.

Rhythmically this piece is the most complex on the record, frequently shifting between 7/8 and 4/4 time. Constructing the vocal melody was a challenge, and I spent quite a bit of time singing along to a recording of the guitar part before I found that I was able to sing and play at

the same time. This ability is one of the more valuable skills that I developed through this project. Paradoxically, ‘unlearning’ the guitar has helped me in a number of technical ways as a musician, and given me a great deal of self-confidence. This fall, in the first round interview for the Watson Fellowship, I sang an old American song entitled *Peg and Awl* (Unknown). This was actually the first time that I had performed as a singer and guitarist together, and received feedback from Dean of the Conservatory Brian Pertl that it was a strong way to introduce myself. The position of a solo singer-songwriter is a vulnerable one, and for me has been an opportunity to grow beyond my instrument, which I feel is easy to hide behind at times.

Ping Pongin’

As an interlude, and hopefully functioning as a bit of comedic relief on the album, *Ping Pongin’* is a simple one-minute long piece recorded live on my iPhone. The original intention was to create the memo on my phone to remember the guitar part, but upon listening back I realized that I enjoyed the overall soundscape that was created with this piece. As I sat playing a very old beat-up guitar, missing two strings and with buzzy tuning machines (heard buzzing on the recording) there was simultaneously a game of ping pong happening in the room. Heard on the recording is the mostly unintelligible banter as they play the game, jubilations in victory and expressions of frustration at losing a volley. As a juxtaposition against the contemplative finger-picked guitar part (in fact the same picking pattern heard on *Before We Knew*, although different harmony, key and tempo) I find the sounds of the game evoke interesting ideas about the various modes of human existence. How different was my frame of mind playing this musical idea from my friends playing a game in the same room? I don’t recall in the moment paying much mind to the game going on, as I imagine they were intently focused on playing and not listening to the guitar coming from the corner.

Isa

This piece is somewhat of an anomaly on the record in a number of ways. Firstly, it has the most reduced instrumentation of the recording, utilizing only voice, guitar, violin and double-bass. Additionally, it is probably the simplest piece on the album, although it does have

some idiosyncrasies (e.g. 5 measure phrases on the verses). Perhaps in context of the record *Isa* has a jarringly simple arrangement and apparent lack of texture and electronics, but the piece stands as a totem for the raw essence of the project overall. While many of the other pieces are more dense, they all aim to provide the listener with an opportunity to relate through a creative exploration of the work and personal experience.

Another way in which this piece was anomalous in the context of the whole project is that it is the only track which ‘came out whole’. My guitar was tuned to DADGAD (an open tuning typically used for Celtic styles) and less than an hour later the song was written. I found that this tune in particular had a very specific cathartic function for me. Certainly, the project overall has been an aid to me in a number of ways emotionally and otherwise, but this tune allowed me the opportunity to process some of my life experiences in a new way that I didn’t realize I needed. Specifically, this song for me, was a way to deal with the deaths of my grandmother and childhood dog, Isa.

The lyrics follow the story of the day my dog was to be put down by the veterinarian. I was a freshman in high school and it was a school day.

When I woke, when I woke
I knew that I had to say goodbye

And when I knew, when I knew
That you were gone, I cried

But somebody once told me all dogs go to heaven
So I know that that’s where you must be

Before the chorus (underlined), it would be easy to think that the song could be about lost love, but the chorus gives a twist that the song is about my dog.

At the vet, at the vet

They were gonna put her down

And granny said, granny said

Oh why can't I just go with her

Do you think all grannies go to heaven?

I sure hope that mine did

Yet another twist comes half-way through the second verse, when the real subject of the song is revealed. I was at school, and unable to go to the vet with my family, but this is how the story was retold. My dog and grandmother were at similar stages in their lives at this point, my grandmother suffering from Alzheimer's. My mother told me that she said something to the effect of, "can I go with her?", referring to my dog, Isa. I didn't know until the song came out of me that I still had processing to do from these losses.

To the Thawing Wind

One of two pieces on the album in which I used text I did not write, *To the Thawing Wind* is a setting of the Robert Frost poem by the same name (Frost). Of course, I use the term 'setting' quite loosely, as I have indeed applied Frost's poem to music but have not applied the words to a melody exactly. I chose to juxtapose the text against a lush backdrop by having the poem recited by my computer. The computer mispronounces words, and has a distinctly non-human quality that starkly contrasts the flowing textural nature of the music and the words. Musically I tie this piece to the album as a whole through, once again, the repeated use of specific instruments and organizational techniques. A lack of steady pulse, but a definite sense of the passage of time is a crucial element of the piece and relates strongly to the content of the poem – an ode to the spring wind. I utilize a toy organ for the central harmonic progression of this piece which is also found on *Deep Breath* and *You Alone*. One hears bells as a central part of this piece, which are found in numerous shapes and forms throughout the record. I enjoy the bells sonically, but also appreciate the associative aspects of the sound. They evoke a

number of different connotations, from church bells to ‘bear bells’ worn in the backcountry to announce one’s presence.

It is important to acknowledge the English rock group Radiohead, and their song *Fitter Happier*, which utilizes a similar ‘robot voice’ technique for the text of the piece. One of the goals in this project was to utilize stereotypes and cliché musical elements to my advantage. In Anne Bogart’s essay *Stereotype* from her book *A Director Prepares* she says, “If we embrace rather than avoid stereotype, if we enter the container and push against its limits, we are testing our humanity and our wakefulness. The containers are powerful visual and audio stimuli for audiences and, if handled with great vigilance by the artist, can connect us with time” (111). To use a cliché without acknowledging it in process is indeed dangerous, but properly placed and utilized can aid in evoking specific thoughts or feelings in the audience. At least for my generation, and specifically in people who are keen to listen to new music coming from the pop arena, Radiohead is a looming figure of innovation in song-form music. Aware that to a certain extent *Fitter Happier* would be in the collective consciousness of many who may hear the music, I intentionally decided to use this technique. Here are the first few lines of Radiohead’s *Fitter Happier* (Radiohead):

Fitter, happier
More productive
Comfortable
Not drinking too much
Regular exercise at the gym, three days a week
...

In my eyes there are certain parallels between the intended meaning of *To the Thawing Wind* and *Fitter Happier*. Both provide an opportunity for the audience to engage with their experience and reflect in similar ways, but from different angles. *To the Thawing Wind* obviously points to the natural world around us and asks that we recall some of the child-like wonder that we may not always pay heed to. Inversely, *Fitter Happier* points to all the things

that many people so often cling to in a fast-paced 21st century lifestyle, forgetting that same wonderment.

Before We Knew

Before we knew is actually the first song I ever wrote, over the summer of 2016. I'm currently experiencing a time of astonishing growth and curiosity, and I think it is interesting to include this piece to show what I was able to accomplish learning this new craft.

In terms of the actual content of the tune, this is the only song on the album that is a 'love song'. Lyrically, I wanted to play with double-meanings and economy in the turns of phrase.

The night sings along
Song for you and I
Should keep our wits about us

In this section of the first verse I have underlined the words that are used to complete multiple sentences. These could be read:

- The night sings along.
- The night sings a long song for you and I.
- For you and I should keep our wits about us.

In doing this I was able to get more meaning from fewer words, making the verse more potent.

You Alone

Over the three or more years that I spent thinking about and applying for the Watson Fellowship, I went through many different project ideas ranging from a 'Silk Road Watson' to a Watson focused on improvisation. One of the final contending ideas was a project about religious music. I wanted to seek the answer to the question, "what is it about music that allows us to access the ineffable?" by interfacing with religious communities around the globe. One of the primary religious groups that I was and remain interested in is the Sufi Mystics of Islam, who often use music as a primary aspect of ceremony in their faith. Through my research on

Sufism I discovered the 13th century poet Hafiz, whose work I adore. The text for *You Alone* is an excerpt from one of his poems entitled *The Courier* (Hafiz). I find Hafiz's poetry astonishingly beautiful. While it is frequently about Allah and inextricably tied to Islam, the tone of the poetry is accessible and universal. Often one could find that it sounds like love poetry (this poem included), and it is in a sense.

Breeze of the new spring day, when the time is ripe, in the way
you alone best know - slip onto the street of You-know-who.

I used the first stanza of the poem as the lyrical content of the piece, and chose to title the song *You Alone* because I found those particular words interesting. I interpret the words 'You Alone' in two different ways, which are intertwined. Of course the one way to interpret this, which is most obvious in the context of this stanza is the exultation of a 'One'. The subject of the poem is one without parallel. However, as one can imagine, being on such a plane would necessarily be a lonely existence. Peerless for eternity sounds like quite a burden. Yet another interpretation of the text is the notion that each of us finds 'God', or 'You-know-who' in a unique way – which no one else can prescribe.

Musically, I chose to emphasize the interpretations of the title in a multi-layered fashion that yields a result quite stark in contrast between the two sections, yet interleaved and related. In composing this piece, I started by reading and meditating on the poem for a few minutes. Immediately after, I recorded a short improvisation on the toy organ, which remains the spine of this section of the piece. I then improvised a melody to the words of this first stanza accompanied by myself moments earlier playing organ. In post-production I heavily altered these two primary layers to this portion of the piece. I first applied a significant amount of reverb to the toy organ track, making the instrument almost unrecognizable. I then intensely processed the vocal track. Influenced by the work of Justin Vernon for his band Bon Iver, especially the song *715 – Creeks*, found on his album *22 A Million*, I attempted to imitate the vocal processing that he uses without access to the extremely expensive equipment he has (Bon Iver). By tripling the vocal track, pitch-shifting two of them up a 9th and 10th respectively,

and auto-tuning all of them to the key of Db major, I was able to recreate some aspects of the sound that Justin Vernon gets. In practice, the way that I went about achieving this sound is not meant to be perfect, and one can hear the moments in the vocal track when the computer can't quite decide which note it should be playing. These are actually some of my favorite sounds of the song, and I decided to use these 'malfunctions' to my advantage rather than working to resolve the 'problem'.

The second half of the piece is a section of an improvisation that I did with New York based experimental jazz saxophonist Tim Berne. Overdubbed percussion by Jon Mueller completes the track, but other than that there is no significant post-production done to alter the sounds. This section of the song has a bleak and dissonant sound that to me evokes the 'loneliness' interpretation of the title. I realized that these two pieces might fit together when I listened back to the improvisation I did with Tim Berne and found that he used some similar melodic gestures to those found in the vocal figures in the first half.

Of note is the fact that the featured musicians on this track, Jon Mueller and Tim Berne, are two of my musical heroes. By reaching out to these musicians who I look up to so much for involvement in this project, I felt an additional sense of commitment to the quality of the work and preparedness in each recording session. In the case of Tim Berne, he was coming to campus to perform. Ahead of that performance I emailed to ask if he would be willing to do some recordings with me, explaining the nature of the project. He at first seemed reluctant, and suggested that we do a lesson instead. Not wanting to put undue pressure on the situation, when he arrived I set up a time for the lesson and decided to have my recording equipment set up in the room. We would improvise together, and if that didn't go well then I would allow it to naturally transition into a lesson rather than a recording session. When the time came for us to play together, we ended up doing two 25-minute-long improvisations together. I asked if he had any critiques to give me, and he responded with nothing but positive sentiments about the experience, saying that it, "felt like a gig." I am so thankful for the experience not only because I was able to use part of the recording for my album, but also because in the context of simply playing with Tim I was able to ascertain what my strengths and weaknesses are as an improviser compared to a world-class musician.

Jon Mueller, differently than Tim Berne, was simply a blind email on my part. I had been obsessed with his work on several albums for months, and having learned that he and Professor Matt Turner had worked together and hearing that he was very approachable I decided to reach out. I described the project, gave a sample of my work (*To the Thawing Wind*) and asked if he had any interest in being involved. After a number of emails exchanged, and much enthusiasm was shared about working together, we created a plan to do some recordings at The Refuge engineered by Spencer Tweedy. Quite differently from the session with Tim Berne, Jon came to Appleton and we recorded percussion overdubs on four of my tracks (*Looking Through the Glass*, *A Leafless Dawn*, *To the Thawing Wind* and *You Alone*). Apart from the hand claps on *A Leafless Dawn* we didn't ever actually play together live (hopefully some day). This session was another valuable learning experience for me. I had to be both assertive about what I wanted and flexible to allow room for Jon's artistry to come through my music. In my view, the purpose of having another musician play on my project was to create a collaborative energy that brings different things out of both the player and the finished product. Jon had ideas about what he wanted to do on the songs that were far better than anything I would have ever thought of, and I feel so fortunate to have had him work on the music.

The improvisatory compositional method employed for this piece applies to the artistic portion of this project as well, as I rely heavily on a dialogue between eye and surface, hand and tool as I work. In the production of the prints which make up the content of the book, I determined a structure of process but gave myself latitude to improvise in the creation of the content. I decided that each side of the print would have four layers, two pressure printed (a process using acetate, paper and very thin layers of ink) and two layers of woodcut. Knowing that the subject of the images was going to be abstract, textural and built up over layers I chose colors that were subtly different from the previous layer, utilizing transparent tint base to further obscure the nature of my process. The pressure printed layers which were done first generated a fuzzy quality that can't be achieved easily with other relief processes. The fuzziness of these layers appealed to me both on aesthetic and conceptual levels. The music that I have produced is often heavily focused on texture and blending, so attempted to fold that into the art as well. Additionally, in terms of the sharper woodblock images that rest on top, those are

similar to the concrete musical aspects that are in the foreground. For example, in *You Alone*, the processed vocals cut through the reverb-drenched toy organ and processed percussion. Another parallel is the way the deep tom drum creates a structure across the entire song compared to the structure of the book I have created, which provides context for the art as a whole.

Dark and Stormy

Dark and Stormy more than perhaps any of the other tracks harkens back to my experience producing beats in High School. Consisting of a relatively simple guitar figure which all the other parts were composed around through improvisation, I wanted the piece to be a simple interlude that utilizes the additive structure idiomatic to hip-hop production. One of the musical ideas that I am keenly interested in is the role reversal of acoustic and electronic instruments. The idea of using a live musician to perform a sample (a pre-recorded loop of music) in real time, or recycling a sample in a number of different ways to make it more unpredictable are two ways that I have done this on *Dark and Stormy*.

Bed of Snow

Bed of Snow is something like a reprise of the beginning of the album. A return to the key of A Major, and the revisiting of certain sounds and textures such as the lap steel, the sound of turning pages, bottles clinking, lush reverb and electronics. However, at this point in the album, the themes are transformed and the lap steel takes a more contemplative role compared to the way it is used on *Summer's Warm Embrace* and *A Leafless Dawn*. Because this is the second to last track on the album, I wanted a piece that would evoke memories of what has come before in the record and provide the opportunity for the audience to reflect on what they have heard.

At all stages of the artistic process, production, image creation, fabrication - I listened to the music of the album, whatever state the mixes were in. In so doing, I believe that I created a deeper connection between the two. Inevitably, the two would inform each other simply by treating them as one. Additionally, in relation to the theme of the work, I created associative

memories for myself between the art and the music. This is a valuable way to feel more connections on a personal level, which further informs the work. I recall a specific moment in which I realized that this track was a perfect aural representation of the 'warm' side of the artist book. It seems like the warm colors and shapes on that print look the way that this piece sounds, inviting and yet somehow out of reach.

Almost Half-Way There

I chose this piece to finish the album because it combines and resolves some of the ideas set up in previous songs on the record, both musical and lyrical. The song lyrically is ambiguous in terms of what it is exactly about, but for me evokes some of the same lyrical themes found in *Before We Knew*, *Looking Through the Glass* and *You Alone*. This is also the one song in which I focused heavily on creating a thoughtful rhyming scheme, perhaps making it one of the more pop-oriented songs on the record. Additionally, the middle instrumental section and immediately following rubato section employ some of the compositional techniques found throughout the record, including the interleaving of acoustic and electronic instruments and the attempt to evoke memory through sound. One way in which I sought to play to the memory of the audience is by incorporating field recordings into the piece. One can hear in these sections faint voices, footsteps, the sound of a lake, and a violin mimicking the sounds that seagulls might make near a body of water. I wanted these sounds to be faint and tucked into the soundscape of the piece as a whole, hoping that each listener can relate them to their own experience as opposed to making it overtly clear what exactly they are. I took this same approach with the visual art that makes up the accordion structure of the book.

The prints in the book are non-representational and textural by nature, each one a little bit different by the nature of the process. The viewer should find that the eye moves around the book to discover new things upon each subsequent viewing. No one way of interpreting the images is wrong, and the audience of the work is encouraged to draw their own conclusions. The accordion structure of the book itself further lends itself to the positive feedback loop of interaction for the audience. By not having the book be a standard structure, the audience is forced to break with the perceived function and format of a book – to interact with it in a new

way. It is my hope that through the work as a whole, each person who interacts with it is able to discover a piece of themselves in the work.

Appendix – Lyrics

Looking Through the Glass

Looking through the glass
Everything moves at it's own pace
So hard to place
Spent is spent, friend

Tackled in the snow
See colors, distant hues
I pose, I pose
It's pouring, really coming down – feel full
Really calming down – feel full

Paint dripping from the walls
We can't understand
Gliffs and Clementines
So far to space
Bent and not said
And I pose, I pose

Tackled in the snow
See colors, distant hues
I pose, I pose
It's pouring, the old man is snoring

Deep Breath

I'm falling down, my feet miss the ground
I'm flying now, the clouds are cold against my skin
A single leaf, impressions in the snow
A deep breath, that smell before it rains

And I know that you can't heal me
Now I must reap what I've sewn, with these hands

I hear the train, my ear's to the rail
It's like a hymn, with no choir to sing
Seeking solace, in a place that's my own
I'm flying now, I feel the sting of the wind

And I know that you can't hear me
Now I must leave what I've built
And I know that you can't heal me
Now I must reap what I've sewn, with these hands

Isa

When I woke, when I woke
I knew that I had to say goodbye

And when I knew, when I knew
That you were gone, I cried

But somebody once told me all dogs go to heaven
So I know that that's where you must be

At the vet, at the vet
They were gonna put her down

And granny said, granny said
Oh why can't I just go with her

Do you think all grannies go to heaven?
I sure hope that mine did

To the Thawing Wind – (Frost)

Come with rain, O loud Southwester!
Bring the singer, bring the nester;
Give the buried flower a dream;
Make the settled snowbank steam;
Find the brown beneath the white;
But whate'er you do tonight,
Bathe my window, make it flow,
Melt it as the ice will go;
Melt the glass and leave the sticks
Like a hermit's crucifix;
Burst into my narrow stall;
Swing the picture on the wall;
Run the rattling pages o'er;
Scatter poems on the floor;
Turn the poet out of door.

Before We Knew

Our limbs entangled
Glistening in the moonlight
The night sings along
Song for you and I
Should keep our wits about us
I can't help but feel
Like we've walked this road before
We knew
We knew

I went down to the river
Just to soak it in
It just carried on and on and on and on
To the sunswept fields
Where I couldn't help but feel
We'd picked this flower before
We knew

You Alone – (Hafiz, 3)

Breeze of the new spring day
When the time is ripe
In the way you alone best know
Slip onto the street of
You-know-who

Almost Half-Way There

I found you cryin', all but alone
I was not sick of you
You needed me
Just like I needed you, to see right through me
All but atoned

We're almost half-way there
It's not like I don't care
I see you standing there
At the bottom of the stair

Works Cited

- Bogart, Anne. "Stereotype." *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre*. London: Routledge, 2010. 111. Print.
- Bon Iver. "715 - CRΣΣKS." *22, A Million*, Justin Vernon, 2016. *Spotify*,
<https://play.spotify.com/album/1PgFRdl3lPyACfUGH4pquG>.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice in Wonderland*. Bath: Parragon, 2012. Print.
- Death Blues. *Ensemble*. Jon Mueller, Rhythmplex, 2014. *Bandcamp*,
<https://rhythmplex.bandcamp.com/album/ensemble>.
- Frost, Robert. "To the Thawing Wind." Public Domain,
<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/thawing-wind>.
- Hafiz. "The Courier." *The Tangled Braid: Ninety-nine Poems by Hafiz of Shiraz*. Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011. N. pag. Print.
- Radiohead. "Fitter Happier." *OK Computer*, 1997. *Sotify*,
https://play.spotify.com/album/2fGCAYUMssLKiUAoNdxGLx?play=true&utm_source=open.spotify.com&utm_medium=open.
- Unknown. *Peg and Awl*. American Traditional, Unknown.
- Washburn, Abigail, and Bela Fleck. "Musical Health." Personal interview. 26 June 2016.